

US backs Turkish military attacks on northern Iraq

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With the backing and assistance of the Bush administration, the Turkish military has launched two attacks in the past three days on Kurdish villages in northern Iraq. While targeted against the guerrilla forces of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the operations are threatening to provoke a broader conflict involving Turkey and Iraq.

The first cross-border attack, the largest since 2003, took place in the early hours of Sunday. Up to 50 fighter jets bombed targets up to 100 kilometres inside Iraq—in the Zap, Avashin and Hakurk regions and in the rugged Qandil mountains. The army followed up the air strikes, which lasted three hours, with a series of artillery barrages on border villages. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan hailed the raids as a “success”, warning that “our struggle [against the PKK] will continue inside and outside Turkey”.

A second operation involving some 300 troops took place yesterday. Ankara claimed that the operation was to pursue PKK guerrillas sighted near the Iraq-Turkish border. A military official told the media that there had been no reports of any casualties from “a limited clash” and the soldiers withdrew later in the day.

Few details are available of the impact of the air attacks. According to the *New York Times*, Hassan Ibrahim, a local mayor, reported that eight villages in the Qandil region had been hit. A woman was killed in Asteawkan, two were wounded in Leawzhea and six houses destroyed. In the village of Qalatuqa near the border, locals told Agence France Presse that dozens of buildings, including a new school, had been razed. The British-based *Times* reported that more than 1,800 people were forced to flee their homes. The PKK claimed that seven people had been killed in the bombing and threatened to retaliate.

The air raids provoked angry reactions from the Iraqi government and the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which presides over three northern Iraqi provinces. The Iraqi parliament issued a statement condemning the bombing as an “outrageous” violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Baghdad summoned the Turkish ambassador and demanded an end to the strikes, declaring they were unacceptable and could seriously harm relations between the two countries.

KRG President Masoud Barzani blamed the US military for

the attacks. “The Americans were responsible because the Iraqi sky is under their full control,” he told a press conference. Washington denied giving authorisation for the air strikes but an American official in Ankara acknowledged that the US had been informed in advance. The Turkish chief-of-staff, General Yasar Buyukanit, was in no doubt that Washington had given the green light. “America last night opened Iraqi airspace to us. By opening Iraqi airspace to us last night America gave its approval to the operation,” he told the media.

The Bush administration not only knew about the planned attack, but provided intelligence to the Turkish military. The *Washington Post* yesterday revealed that the US military has diverted surveillance aircraft and unmanned drones to northern Iraq and established a centre in Ankara to share military intelligence with its Turkish counterparts. An American official said that the US was “essentially handing them their targets” and leaving it up to the Turkish military to act. “They said, ‘We want to do something.’ We said ‘Okay, it’s your decision,’” the official told the newspaper on Monday.

Senior US generals—including General David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General John Craddock, head of the US European Command—have been in talks with Turkey about anti-PKK operations since last month. Washington has also put pressure on the Iraqi government and the KRG to shut PKK offices in northern Iraq and to take steps to isolate areas in which the PKK is based.

The US actions followed a meeting in early November between President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, in which Bush promised to provide American intelligence if Turkey restricted its operations against the PKK inside northern Iraq. The Turkish military had already massed 100,000 troops backed by tanks, artillery and warplanes on the border with Iraq. Amid weeks of anti-Kurdish agitation by right-wing nationalists, the Turkish parliament voted in October to formally approve cross-border incursions.

Last Sunday’s air raids were the first major Turkish attack on targets inside Iraq. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who made an unannounced visit to Iraq yesterday, only referred to the Turkish operation indirectly, saying: “No one should do anything that threatens to destabilise the north [of the

country].”

Washington’s support for the Turkish military operations, however, is having a profoundly destabilising effect. KRG President Barzani responded to the latest Turkish incursion by cancelling a planned meeting with Rice in Baghdad in protest. “Turkish troops committed an atrocious crime against innocent civilians and violated Iraqi sovereignty,” he said. The two Kurdish nationalist parties—Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—are acutely sensitive to any shift in Washington. Having fully backed the illegal US invasion of Iraq, the KDP and PUK expected ongoing US support for the establishment of their own small political and business empire in the northern Kurdish enclave.

Barzani’s protests reflect far broader anger among Iraq’s Kurdish population. Magazine editor Nawzad Bolous from the northern city of Irbil told the *Christian Science Monitor*: “The feeling on the street is that we must not just sit back idly while this is taking place. There is anger towards the US forces. People feel they gave the green light to the Turks to bomb.” Human rights activist Sarkot Hama also pointed the finger at the government in Baghdad. “There is a feeling among a lot of Kurds that the Maliki government is ready to give the Turks all the help they need to bomb locations in Kurdistan,” he said.

The Bush administration’s backing for the Turkish attacks also makes a mockery of its claims to have created an independent Iraq. While the US was told in advance of the raids, Turkey did not inform, let alone consult with, the Iraqi government. No one in Washington told Baghdad either. The US collusion with Turkey in military attacks on Iraqi territory is just the latest in a series of steps designed to marginalise the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. In recent months, the US military has put tens of thousands of Sunni militiamen on its payroll, despite Maliki’s protests that these forces were deeply hostile to the Shiite fundamentalist parties that underpin his government.

Washington’s determination to strengthen relations with Turkey, if need be at the expense of its Kurdish allies, has another ominous dimension. As it has intensified its confrontation with Iran, the Bush administration has been increasingly critical of Ankara’s growing ties with Tehran. By assisting Turkey in its operations against the PKK, the US is hoping to further isolate Iran. Significantly, one of the areas of Turkish-Iranian cooperation has been in coordinating military operations against the PKK and its sister organisation, the Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), which carries out guerrilla attacks inside Iran from bases in northern Iraq.

The hypocrisy of the Bush administration is underscored by the fact that the US regards the PKK as a “terrorist organisation” while covertly providing assistance to PJAK as a means of undermining the Iranian government. While justifying Turkish attacks on Kurdish villages, the US administration and media have vigorously condemned Iranian shelling of PJAK

hideouts inside northern Iraq earlier this year. If Iranian warplanes had conducted the raids on Sunday, there is no doubt that the Bush administration would have responded in the most bellicose terms.

While in Baghdad yesterday, US Secretary of State Rice again declared that “the United States, Iraq and Turkey share a common interest in stopping the activities of the PKK”. Washington is engaged in a precarious juggling act—offering political and military support to Turkey, on the one hand, without completely undermining the position of the Kurdish nationalist parties, on the other. The KDP and PUK have been key US allies in shoring up the US occupation in Baghdad and stabilising the Kurdish north.

Turkey, however, has ambitions that go beyond neutralising the PKK. The Turkish military has already accused the Kurdish Regional Government of sheltering and assisting the PKK and threatened to deal with KRG President Barzani in any invasion of northern Iraq. Ankara has been hostile to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish region from the outset, viewing it as encouraging Kurdish separatism in Turkey. Turkey has warned in particular that it would not tolerate the incorporation of the city of Kirkuk and the surrounding oil-rich areas into the Kurdish region—a step that could provide the economic basis for a separate Kurdish state. The KRG, however, is pressing for a delayed referendum on the issue to proceed.

By backing the Turkey’s cross-border raids, the Bush administration has opened up a can of worms that could set off another explosive conflict in a country already ruined by more than four years of war.



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